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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that teacher involvement can stimulate and enrich children's play, with positive developmental consequences. This study examined teachers' thinking and practices in relation to the role of the teacher in children's outdoor play. Data were collected from eight preschools through teacher interviews and observations of children's outdoor play. Results revealed that teachers have a distinct and shared belief that, while children should be carefully supervised, they should have the freedom to engage in activities of their own choice, without unnecessary intervention from teachers. Teachers predominantly perceived their role in terms of setting the stage for play, observing and monitoring events, and intervening or redirecting only when children's behavior was considered inappropriate. This view of minimal intervention by teachers was consistent with their beliefs about children as learners and about the purpose and value of outdoor play in the early childhood curriculum. Observations of children's outdoor play supported teachers' reports of their beliefs about their role outdoors. (Contains 52 references.) (EV)

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THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN OUTDOOR PLAY: PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

The study reported in this paper was designed to examine teachers' thinking, and their practices, in relation to the role of the teacher in children's outdoor play. Interviews with eight preschool teachers revealed beliefs about the teacher's role that were consistent with beliefs about the purpose and value of outdoor play in the early childhood curriculum. Furthermore, observations of children's play in these eight preschools supported teachers' reports of their curriculum beliefs. Implications of these findings for the professional development of early childhood teachers are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that the early childhood teacher has a significant role in promoting children's development and learning. Furthermore, the particular nature of this role derives from the developmental theoretical framework that underpins early childhood education.

According to developmental theory, young children are self-motivated, active learners. Through direct experiences in their environments, and through their play, children extend their physical and socio-emotional development, and construct understandings of their world. More complex understandings, and more complex ways of thinking, develop progressively as children interact within and upon the environment. Children's development is enhanced through interaction with others, particularly with adults and more capable peers, who both challenge the child's developing conceptions and provide frameworks, or scaffolding, to support the development of shared socio-cultural understandings (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992).

In early childhood education, where a central purpose is to support and promote all aspects of individual children's development, the role of the teacher is primarily to encourage exploration and social interaction, and to respond to the initiatives of individual children (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; New, 1992). Rather than imparting information or instructing children directly, the teacher creates settings for child-initiated play and adopts particular strategies to support this play (Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

A range of teacher strategies to facilitate play and, hence, development has been identified in the literature. One important such strategy is for teachers to observe children and their play to acquire insight into the interests, perceptions, understandings, feelings and capacities of individual children (e.g., Abbott, 1994; Hurst, 1994; Jones & Reynolds, 1992). These observations then provide the basis for planning the environment, the ongoing assessment of the play needs of individuals and groups of children, and the appropriate timing and level of teacher intervention in children's activities (Heaslip, 1994).

Other strategies involve more direct teacher intervention, albeit in response to children's actions. Teachers guide children to play safely and constructively, and extend children's activities through suggestions or questions, sometimes participating with children to extend a play theme or conceptual understandings, sometimes redirecting to exploit incidental learning

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(Hildebrand, 1990). Teachers also act as mediators, helping children to learn to solve problems on their own (Jones & Reynolds, 1992), to develop self-control and to build self-esteem (Bredekamp, 1987).

Promoting dialogue with, and among, young children in play is regarded as another important aspect of the early childhood teacher's role (e.g., David, 1990; Fleer, 1992). Communication and interaction with peers and adults in the context of play contribute to children's socialisation (Scales, 1987), to their emotional (Kuebli, 1994) and cognitive development (New, 1992).

Research has shown that teacher involvement can stimulate and enrich children's play, with positive developmental consequences (e.g., Casey & Lippman, 1991; Creaser, 1989; McCune, 1986; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Saltz & Saltz, 1986; Smilansky, 1990). However, research also supports children's need to engage in free play, alone and with peers, without interference from adults (e.g., Christie & Wardle, 1992). For example, the mere presence of adults can be constraining for some children. The presence of teachers has been shown to inhibit preschool children's dramatic play, their social interaction and their willingness to negotiate their own solutions to conflict (Pellegrini, 1984). Parental presence had a similar effect of inhibiting the fantasy play of four- and five-year-old children, although it had a facilitating effect for younger two- and three-year-olds (Perlmutter & Pellegrini, 1987).

Research further indicates that excessive and inappropriate adult interaction can have disruptive effects on children's play (Berk, 1994). Such interaction has been found, for example, to disrupt the flow of play (Silver & Ramsey, 1983) and to limit children's use of language and expression of thought (Tizard & Hughes, 1984), their involvement in socio-dramatic play (Creaser, 1989), and their interaction with peers (Innocenti, Stowitschek, Rule, Killoran, Striefel & Boswell, 1986).

For teacher interaction in children's play to be effective, adults need to be sensitive to children's individual development and interests. Moreover, teachers need to appreciate and respect the child's point of view and to synchronise their intervention in a reciprocal manner with the child's efforts and abilities (Abbott, 1994; Am, 1986; Creaser, 1989; David, 1990; Kitson, 1994; Tamburrini, 1986; Vukelich, 1994; Wolfgang & Sanders, 1986).

There are, however, some indications that early childhood teachers may not fully understand the importance of adults and children interacting and working together in the play context or the nature of these interactive relationships (David, 1990; Moyles, 1994). For instance, teachers appear to hold different conceptions of their role relative to children's activity. Some teachers clearly see the need for teacher participation, in varying degrees to promote children's thinking and learning (e.g., Ayers, 1989; Regan & Weininger, 1988). In contrast, other nursery, preschool and child care teachers seem to believe children should be left to explore and experiment in the play environment, with opportunities for peer interactions but largely uninterrupted by adults (e.g., File, 1994; Howes & Clements, 1994; Hutt, Tyler, Hutt & Christopherson, 1989; Smilansky, 1990).

The tendency for teachers to stand around watching children play, intervening only when a safety hazard arises or when a child requires some form of assistance, appears to be a particular feature of teachers' interpretation of their role in outdoor settings. There has been a strong tradition in education that the outdoor setting and, particularly, the school playground is merely a place for teachers to take a rest and for children to expend excess energy, to engage in boisterous activity and to have a break from what is perceived to be the more important learning that occurs indoors in the classroom (Essa, 1992; Gelenter, 1988; Yerkes, 1988).

Supporting evidence for such attitudes to an early childhood teacher's role in outdoor play can be found in observational studies of teacher and child behaviours outdoors. Child care, preschool and nursery teachers were rarely observed participating in children's activities outdoors (Brown & Burger, 1984; Hutt et al., 1989; Wittmer & Honig, 1994) and teacher

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participation was mainly confined to setting up equipment, settling disputes among children and maintaining safety (Jones, 1989; Sylva, Roy & Painter, 1980).

Limited teacher perspectives on the educational potential of outdoor play, and on the teacher's own role in outdoor play, can have important consequences for children's play and for their development. Research indicates that teachers who either did not understand, or underestimated, the potential of outdoors play to stimulate various aspects of children's learning and development, other than physical development, provided sterile outdoor environments with limited play choices and opportunities (Creaser, 1985; Hutt et al., 1989; Jones, 1989). As a consequence, much of children's play was physical (Hutt et al., 1989) and showed little imagination or complexity (Creaser, 1985; Jones, 1989), while teachers' behaviour centred on maintaining safety and directing children's play (Creaser, 1985; Jones, 1989). More importantly, these studies demonstrated that the re-evaluation by teachers of their outdoor environments led to the creation of more interesting and stimulating settings where children were observed to be absorbed in complex and productive play and where teachers, too, became more creative in the strategies they used to support this play.

Unfortunately, there is relatively little direct research on teachers' conceptions of their role in children's play or on the relationship between teachers' thinking and their practice on this issue. Research is particularly scarce, moreover, on children's play in outdoor settings. The purpose of this paper is to present findings on these issues from a larger investigation of the outdoor curriculum in early childhood education (Davies, 1995). The findings reported here comprise an examination of teachers' thinking and their practices in relation to the role of the teacher in children's outdoor play.

METHOD

Data for this paper were drawn from a study conducted in eight preschools. The study involved interviews with teachers about their beliefs and practices relating to the outdoor curriculum and observations of children's outdoor play. Interviews were conducted after children were observed to ensure the interview experience did not influence teachers' practice (following Berk, 1976). For the purpose of this paper, only methodological details pertaining to teachers' beliefs about the role of the teacher and observations of teacher behaviour in relation to children's play are reported.

Participants

Participants were the teaching Directors of eight preschools. Two were the owners of private preschools. One (T1) had trained as a primary teacher, the other (T2) had no formal training. The other six, from community preschools, held some form of early childhood teaching qualification in the form of a Child Care Certificate (T3) or a Degree or Diploma in Early Childhood Education (T4, T5, T6, T7, T8). Teaching experience varied from five to 32 years.

Other participants were 10 four-year-old children selected from each of the eight preschools, yielding a total sample of 80 children. Children were selected for inclusion in the sample not only according to their age but also because they attended the particular preschool the same two days per week and had not attended an early childhood service prior to enrolling at the preschool.

Procedures

Teachers were interviewed by the author at their preschools in a room away from the children and at a time convenient to them. With the permission of teachers, interviews were audiotaped. The technique of focused interviews was employed to focus attention on issues and guide discussion as this approach is considered more effective than structured techniques in exploring teacher thinking and beliefs (Kidder, 1981). An interview guide of open-ended questions was developed, with questions relating to various aspects of the outdoor curriculum, including the role of teachers in outdoor play.

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Audiotapes were transcribed in full. Following procedures described by Miles and Huberman (1984), responses to focus questions were coded using categories generated from teachers' responses. After the initial coding of data, samples of responses were independently coded by a colleague. The two sets of coding were then compared, points of disagreement discussed, codes refined and data re-analysed.

Observations of children were obtained by three trained observers using the Target Child Observation Method (Sylva et al., 1980). This method involved recording one 20-minute running observation of each target child. Immediately after each observation session was completed, observation records were coded by the observer responsible for collecting the data. Observations were coded, in 30 second intervals, for type of play, social interaction, type of communication, presence of teacher and teacher behaviour. Teacher behaviour codes were adapted from Creaser (1989). These included:

- *present, no involvement*
- *management of environment*, e.g., rearranges equipment
- *care*, e.g., helps with clothing, attends to hurt child
- *verbal comment*, e.g., comment, explanation, conversation, praise
- *behaviour management*, e.g., gives direction, states rules
- *physical help in play*, e.g., pushes swing, gets pet from cage
- *supports play*, e.g., offers resources, suggests activity, suggests solution to play problem, questions to extend play
- *plays with*, e.g., takes role in pretence.

Finally, an *other* code was used when the behaviour of the teacher was directed to children other than the target child and where the intent of teacher behaviour was unclear from the observation.

RESULTS

Teacher thinking

Teachers' responses to the question about the role they take in the outdoor setting revealed a distinct and shared belief that, while children should be carefully supervised, they should have the freedom to engage in activities of their own choice, without unnecessary intervention from teachers.

> *I want (staff) to supervise very, very carefully. I don't expect them to interfere unnecessarily ... I like the children to have a great deal of freedom ... freedom to express themselves, freedom to race around ... where there's not a lot of interference from an adult.* (T1)

> *(We) provide the equipment and let them use it how they want to.* (T2)

> *... (children) want to use (gross motor equipment) in a different way. And we don't hamper that choice of using it (the equipment) in a different way as long as it's a safe practice and there's an adult close by.* (T7)

Teachers predominantly perceived their role in terms of setting the stage for play, observing and monitoring events, and intervening or redirecting only when children's behaviour was considered to be inappropriate or unsafe.

> *I draw the line when they take witches hats up (on the climbing frame) and throw them overboard ... I don't like wild play ... And I like to bring them in for a cooling down time if I can.* (T3)

> *If there are difficulties staff step in and redirect and may introduce another activity which might be block building, let's make a tent, let's go and do this, or bring out a ball game. So it's redirection in a constructive way.* (T8)

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Providing emotional support to children was considered an important aspect of the teacher's role. So, too, was encouraging children with particular needs to participate in specific activities.

> *Encourage the children that really aren't keen to just try, with us helping them ... A lot of children do stand back. Only just look. So they're the ones I suppose you need to encourage.* (T5)

> *We are aware that we need to encourage children who are interested in quiet more sedentary activities. We try to encourage their participation in other activities for further development in other areas.* (T7)

Some mentioned staff participating in children's play; however, from other comments they made, it appeared this interaction with children in their play was not perceived as a major part of the teacher's role. Nor was an active leadership role in play considered important: only two teachers made reference to extending play through questions, comments or suggestions.

> *We're extending vocabulary and we're extending their thoughts and their ideas and things like that.* (T6)

> *... intervening to actually promote their play. It may be to help social interactions, to suggest ideas, to help develop them cognitively if they're filling water up in bottles in the sandpit.* (T4)

There also were few references to the use of more direct teaching approaches in the outdoor setting, such as organising games or teaching a skill. When teachers did talk about extending children's play in these more direct ways, this always appeared to be based on the teacher's interpretation of the children's needs or interests. Teachers stressed the importance of using children's ideas and interests as starting points for teacher intervention and of avoiding unnecessary intervention in children's activities:

> *Children have their own basic ideas but as teachers I feel that our role is taking them that little bit further, but being aware of when you're needed and when you're not.* (T4)

It appears these teachers had very clear conceptions of the role of the teacher in children's outdoor play. Further, this view of minimal intervention by teachers was consistent with their beliefs about children as learners and about the purpose and value of outdoor play in the early childhood curriculum, beliefs that were evident from their responses to other questions. Teachers expressed clear beliefs that children are self motivated and capable of initiating and directing their own activity, and that children learn through interacting with the environment. In addition, the function of outdoor play in the curriculum was conceptualised as a setting for fun, enjoyment and free play:

> *... freedom to satisfy basic needs, of needing to dig, play in dirt and needing to climb.* (T6)

> *I don't like structuring them ... I like to leave them free ... I feel very strongly that you only have one childhood and it's a pity not to be able to be a little child when you can ... Let them sort of be as free as they can.* (T3)

The function of outdoors also was conceptualised in terms of promoting physical aspects of development: specifically in terms of physical health; the release of physical energy; and the development of physical and movement skills. Additionally, teachers thought children gain from the opportunities available outdoors to interact with other children, learning to play cooperatively, and developing communication and negotiation skills.

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I think they achieve a lot of socialisation where they're mixing and talking and chatting and starting to enter into fantasy games and things like that. (T6)

Again, however, it was clear that teachers believed this development occurred, for the most part, with little need for intervention or direction from teachers.

There are children who need some direction. Some idea of how to go about playing ... Now a lot of children pick this up by observing the other children and modelling them but there are some children who don't — so they need a little help. (T4)

I like them to work out their own problems ... because they're fours and fives, they're not babies, they're not threes. If we are going to step in and solve their problems for them, that is not the essence of what I'm doing here. My aim is to help children communicate between each other. (T1)

Taken together, responses to questions about the role of teachers and about the purpose and value of outdoor play suggest teachers conceptualised the outdoor setting predominantly in terms of its unstructured nature. To these teachers, outdoors was a setting where children's development proceeds as they play and interact with the environment and each other, relatively free of adult intervention:

... have an interesting and stimulating environment for them to play in and then they (the children) can work on their skills in that environment. (T5)

(Teachers) provide equipment and activities so (the children) can interact with it and develop at their own rate ... let them use it how they want to. (T2)

Teacher behaviour

Observations of children's outdoor play supported teachers' reports of their beliefs about their role outdoors. Although teachers were always present to supervise children, they were only observed in close proximity to target children in 28.6% of observations (Table 1).

Furthermore, when teachers were observed near target children, they did not interact with them in any way for almost half of these instances. That is, for 10.8% of the 28.6% of total observation intervals in which teachers were observed near target children, no involvement or interaction occurred. Of the remaining observations, the most frequent form of involvement by teachers in children's activities was making comments or conversing with children (4.4%) and managing children's behaviour by giving directions or reminding children of rules (3.7%). Teachers also were observed to give physical help to children (1.8%) by holding their hand while on a plank, getting pets from cages and hammering nails into timber at the carpentry bench when children were unable to do this themselves. Rarely were teachers observed playing with children (1.9%) or taking an active teaching role (1.6%) of extending children's play by asking questions, suggesting solutions to problems, or offering resources to children.

Caution is required, however, in interpreting these results relating to the amount of contact between teachers and children. Firstly, as the focus of the observation procedure was a target child, and not teachers, the results cannot provide an entirely accurate account of teaching practice. Secondly, although teachers were asked to behave as they normally do, it is possible that they purposely kept away from the target child being observed in the mistaken view that teacher interactions with the target child would be detrimental to the study. Nonetheless, these findings of limited contact between teachers and children outdoors are consistent with those of other studies, which have reported, for example, that few teachers considered they had a role in terms of intervening in children's play (Smilansky, 1990) and that teachers were rarely observed participating in children's play, indoors or outdoors (e.g., Brown & Burger,

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1984; Creaser, 1989; File, 1994; Howes & Clements, 1994; Hutt et al., 1989; Wittmer & Honig, 1994).

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGE OF TEACHER BEHAVIOUR IN CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

Teacher Behaviour	%
No teacher present	71.4
Teacher present	28.6
* no involvement	10.8
* verbal comment	4.4
* behaviour management	3.7
* plays with	1.9
* physical help in play	1.8
* supports play	1.6
* care	0.5
* management of environment	0.5
* other	3.4
Total	100.0

DISCUSSION

The results of this research on teachers' behaviour and their conceptions of their own role relative to children's play in the outdoor environment need to be interpreted within the context of the small sample size and the specific socio-cultural region from which the sample was selected. Nevertheless, data obtained from teachers themselves and inferences from observations of their infrequent interaction in children's activities together suggest that these teachers appeared to hold relatively limited conceptions of their role in relation to promoting children's development in the outdoor setting.

The emphasis by these teachers on free play in outdoor settings, as opposed to greater teacher direction of preschool children's learning, is, to some extent, consistent with the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of early childhood education. It is possible, however, as other suggest (e.g., Brown & Burger, 1984; Gelenter, 1988; Hutt et al., 1989), that these teachers' attitudes of minimal involvement with children outdoors reflected a view of outdoors as a less important context for development than indoors.

Other factors, too, may contribute to teachers' attitudes and practices in these settings. These relate to the nature of the outdoor context itself and to the work of early childhood teachers. For example, teachers tend to have less control over the nature and organisation of outdoors in comparison to indoor environments (Schickedanz, York, Stewart & White, 1990). The size and fixed state of much of the equipment, as well as the natural features of the environment, can restrict the way in which teachers plan activities and set up other equipment. Often, too, the design of the environment has been executed in past years by previously employed staff and any improvements are usually complex and expensive. In addition, teacher control over the organisation and planning of the outdoor space can be limited when the area is shared by other teachers and their groups of children (Schickedanz et al., 1990).

Design features such as surfacing, storage and access to facilities can create particular difficulties for teachers (Davies, 1995; Gelenter, 1988). For example, grassed areas with insufficient drainage make it difficult to set up structured activities or messy play, and hard surfaces can restrict climbing and jumping activities. Inadequate storage may require staff to

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frequently move large, heavy items of equipment, and poor access to facilities such as water can create further stress on staff. Under circumstances such as these, staff can feel disinclined to expend the energy required to plan an effective learning environment or to participate actively with children outdoors. Furthermore, the stressful nature of working with young children in child care and preschool centres may lead staff to use outdoors for their own relaxation while children play freely (Gelenter, 1988).

Teachers' limited conceptions about their role outdoors also may be indicative of a lack of familiarity with recent theoretical developments and associated research, which indicate the important scaffolding role teachers can take in promoting development (David, 1990; Monighan-Nourot, 1990). If this is so, then a focus in professional development programs on recent play research and developmental theories may serve to extend practicing teachers' understandings of the complexity of their role in the early education process.

At the same time, however, it is imperative that teachers do not become so enthusiastic about the potential of outdoor settings, and their own role in children's play, that they unintentionally undermine the value of the outdoor curriculum. For, as Fein (1985:45) warns:

> *In out well-meaning adult enthusiasm to leave no corner of the child's world untouched, we may touch this world so thoroughly as to destroy that which we are seeking to nurture. We may turn play into its opposite, another adult-dominated sphere of activity.*

To this end, it is important that professional development programs highlight the special significance freedom in outdoor settings can have in young children's developing motivational and affective orientations to learning. Outdoor settings provide extensive opportunities for exploration, active participation, choice and self-initiated activities: all of which have been shown to be crucial in fostering children's intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes to learning; and which, in turn, facilitate later performance in school settings (Grolnick, 1991). In addition, opportunities such as these enable children to experience a sense of mastery and control over their world, something which may be increasingly rare in contemporary society where children's lives appear to becoming more organised by adults.

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